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IV. — *Atticism in Petronius*

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IN the course of the centuries Petronius has acquired a reputation in several fields. His career and character offer so many aspects that he appears now as an efficient administrator, now as an accomplished idler; now as a creator of picaresque literature, now as a moralist; now as Nero's *elegantiae arbiter*, now as a medieval bishop — and perhaps this would have seemed to Petronius the most unkindest cut of all. He has gained a name too as a critic of literature, largely through a single phrase, *Horati curiosa felicitas*, and perhaps no phrase in all critical literature combines so much truth with so much brevity. It is worth while to examine in detail his literary principles, for the author of such a phrase must have theories of value. In the mangled fragments of the *Saturae* we find several passages which set forth his own views or those of his characters. The effort to determine which of these alternatives is true is worth while. Few authors are so impersonal, but I believe this quality in him can be easily exaggerated. On certain points I think he is willing to reveal to us his real opinions.

Just how far Encolpius represents Petronius is a matter much discussed. I do not recall that it has been pointed out that Encolpius is the metrical equivalent of Petronius. I should not attach much importance to this, however. Petronius' realism is eloquent enough of the life he describes, and no one in as close touch as he with Nero's court could have easily escaped such knowledge. His excuse, if he troubled himself to make one, was the cynical

Quodque facit populus candida lingua refert.

Much has been said about Petronius' literary views, but no systematic effort has been made to trace them to their sources nor to indicate his affiliations. Criticism of oratory and poetry is given to Encolpius, the rhetorician Agamemnon,

and the poet Eumolpus. The three men are different in habits, training, and environment. Yet they express similar opinions, and it seems probable that the opinions are those of Petronius himself.¹ Petronius was interested in literature, had an ideal to defend, and possibly had an ulterior motive which directed his attention to epic poetry at least. Let us examine the principal passages in which literary criticism is contained.

At the beginning of the extant fragments, Encolpius is declaiming on the decline of oratory. I shall summarize briefly this and the other passages before subjecting them to a more detailed examination. The chief cause of the decline of eloquence is the practice of declamation, with its unreality of theme and its striving for verbal effects. Thus substance becomes less important. The influence of Asiatic oratory was disastrous. Poetry and painting have suffered the same fate. At this point (3) Agamemnon interrupts. He admits the reasonableness of Encolpius' arguments, but puts all the blame on parents, who insist on rushing their boys into the forum without giving them time for the severe training the orator should receive. His constructive criticism is contained in a *schedium Lucilianae humilitatis*. The first requirement of the orator is personal virtue (we think of *vir bonus dicendi peritus*), the next long study of Homer, the philosophers, Demosthenes and Cicero, with much practice in composition. (The exact text and interpretation of vv. 17 ff. are uncertain, but so much seems clear.) The subject is attractive to Petronius, for he has Encolpius listen diligently, while most of the poetic passages in the *Saturae* are less well received. Thus, for example, Eumolpus is stoned for his *Troiae Halosis*, and the *Civil War* is described as delivered *ingenti volubilitate verborum*. But the best example of Petronius' scorn for Eumolpus is found in 115, where Eumolpus, just after escaping death in the shipwreck, is displayed to us filling a huge sheet of parchment with verses, meanwhile bellowing like a beast trying to escape from its pen. Thus it appears that in general Petronius did not take his poetry very seriously, nor

¹ Cf. Collignon, *Étude sur Pétrone*, 62-63.

expect his readers to do so. The serious attention, even though temporary, given the *schedium* is therefore worth noting. The subject matter redeems it.

The other important passage is 118, which bears less directly on oratory, but contains much of Petronius' literary creed. Eumolpus beguiles a tedious journey with a dissertation on the art of poetry. Poetry is not merely a matter of writing verses that will scan. Neither should it be regarded as a relaxation from the serious business of life. Much reading is a necessary preparation. Cheapness and commonness of expression should be avoided. The decorations should be integral parts of the structure, not mere additions to it. Homer, the lyric poets, Roman Virgil and Horace alone have succeeded. An epic poem on the Civil War is destined to fail unless the author is *plenus litteris*. As a matter of fact, such a theme is not proper for epic at all, but belongs to history, which has a different goal and demands a different treatment. But he follows this argument, quite inconsistently, I think, with an impromptu and unfinished epic on the Civil War of Caesar and Pompey.

A certain resemblance in the various passages is at once apparent. Encolpius, Agamemnon, and Eumolpus agree on severe training and wide reading, especially of certain standard authors. Their metaphorical language is similar: cf. *lectione severa irrigarentur* (4, 3) and *ingenti flumine litterarum inundata* (118, 3). In confirmation of the view that these are in large measure Petronius' own opinions, we may recall the fact that he (or Encolpius) was very fond of Virgil (68, 5), and has freely imitated Horace.²

I return now to the discussion of the details of the first passage. The examination will bring out the fact that the point of view from which Petronius regards literature is that of the earlier Atticists. The phrase *levibus atque inanibus sonis* (2, 2) finds an interesting parallel in Suet. *Aug.* 86, where Augustus is represented as saying to Antony: an

² The reminiscences of Horace are collected, perhaps with excessive diligence, by Collignon, 247 ff. It is certain, however, that Petronius knew and enjoyed Horace. An intellectual sympathy existed between the two men. See below.

potius Asiaticorum oratorum inanis sentiētiis verborum volubilitas in nostrum sermonem transferenda? Cf. also the use of *volubilitas* in connection with the *Bellum Civile*, quoted above. Antony is well known to have been an Asiatic (Plut. *Ant.* 2), while the use of *elegans et temperatum* by Suetonius (*l.c.*) of Augustus' style is sufficient to characterize him as an Atticist. I do not believe, as Collignon (79) apparently does, that the Petronius passage is a direct reminiscence of Augustus' letter. Such phrases were catchwords of criticism, in general use, and part of the common stock. The same observation will apply to many of the other parallels I shall cite. The figure in *corpus orationis enervaretur* (2, 2) is very common: cf. *e.g.*, Cic. *Or.* 76; *de Opt. Gen. Or.* 8; *Brut.* 51; and the very frequent use of *sanus* and *sanitas* of Atticism. *Grandis* et ut ita dicam pudica oratio non est maculosa nec turgida, sed naturali pulchritudine exsurgit (2, 6). *Grandis* here seems not to be the technical term applied to one of the three styles. It is rather what Petronius would call the real 'grand' style (defined by the rest of the sentence), not the so-called 'grand' style of the rhetorician. This interpretation is perhaps confirmed by Agamemnon's *illa grandis oratio* (4, 3), which might be taken as an echo. *Pudica* seems not to be used in this sense by any earlier writer (hence the apologetic phrase?), but it is found in Fronto (*Laudes fumi et pulveris*, 4) with reference to Cato the Elder, *i.e.*, as a characterization of the Atticist. *Maculosa* is found also in Fronto (*ad M. Aur. de Orat.* 4, 3), not in exactly the same sense as here, but still as a term of reproach for faults of style. *Turgida* at once suggests Horace's *professus grandia turget* (*A.P.* 27) and *turgidus Alpinus* (*Serm.* 1, 10, 36; on both see Ullman, *Class. Phil.* x, 290) and *Rhet. ad Heren.* iv, 10. *Naturali* may refer to the Atticist's striving for the closest imitation of cultured conversation, but I should not press the point. *Nuper ventosa et enormis loquacitas Athenas ex Asia commigravit . . .* (2, 7). Here we have a direct and explicit condemnation of Asiatic oratory, but the use of *Athenas* instead of *Romam* has suggested the possibility that Petronius is here imitating or even transcribing

some Greek original.³ Yet the sentence is quite in Petronius' manner, and the sentiment undoubtedly accords with his own.⁴ Ad summam, quis postea Thucydidis, quis Hyperidis ad famam processit? (2, 8). Collignon (84) here truly remarks: "Pétrone est dans la tradition du pur Atticisme et considère comme des modèles Thucydide et Hypéride, qu'il oppose aux orateurs asiatiques." For these models of the Atticist, cf. *e.g.*, Cic. *Or.* 30 f.; *Brut.* 68. For the phrase *sani coloris* (2, 8) see above.

In 3-5 Agamemnon replies. He explains that the teacher is not to blame, who finds it necessary *cum insanientibus furere* (3, 2). The responsibility rests with parents, who wish their sons hurried through school. Such complaints were frequent: cf. Orbilius ap. Suet. *de Gram.* p. 107 R. A proper attitude would permit — ut studiosi iuvenes lectione severa irrigarentur, ut sapientiae praeceptis animos componerent, ut verba atroci stilo effoderent, ut quod vellent imitari diu audirent, ut *persuaderent* sibi nihil esse magnificum quod pueris placeret: iam illa grandis oratio haberet maiestatis suae pondus (4, 3). For *irrigarentur* see above and cf. Tac. *Dial.* 30 for *exundat* in a similar sense. *Effodere atroci stilo* seems to be an invention of Petronius, but reminds one in its meaning of Horace's *saepe stilum vertas* (*Serm.* I, 10, 72). Agamemnon continues his argument with a *schedium Lucilianae humilitatis* (5). One wonders whether it was a sub-conscious recognition of Atticism that led some one to conjecture *Licinianae* (*i.e.*, Calvus, the arch-Atticist). The general plan of education, beginning with poetry, is recom-

³ This may throw some light on the problem of Petronius' sources.

⁴ Another possible reference to the Asiatic style occurs in 44, 6 ff. Ganymedes is discussing Safinius, a former aedile: Cum ageret porro in foro, sic illius vox crescebat tanquam tuba. Nec sudavit unquam nec expuit, puto eum nescio quid Asiadis habuisse. It is more likely that this refers to some natural endowment of persons of Asiatic birth than to the Asiatic style. In any case this typical freedman, an object of ridicule, can hardly be expected to have more than a vague knowledge of the meaning of a technical term of rhetoric. Ganymedes can hardly be taken to represent Petronius' real views. It is just conceivable, though not probable, that *sudavit* was chosen deliberately for its Atticistic connotations (Hor. *A.P.* 240). For somewhat similar qualifications for an orator, see Hor. *Serm.* I, 6, 42-44.

mended by Cicero and Quintilian. For philosophy see Hor. *A.P.* 310. The rest of the passage offers many textual difficulties, and I shall therefore not argue on the basis of it. The phrase *flumine largo plenus* is, however, worth noting.

Let us turn to 118. Any one who can write verses that are metrically correct (*versum pedibus instruxit*; cf. *concludere versum*, Hor. *Serm.* 1, 4, 40 and the whole argument, which closely resembles that of Petronius) thinks he has at once become a poet. Poetry is made a relaxation from the forum (cf. Tac. *Dial.* 5) by people who think it is easier to write verses than to compose *controversiam sententiolis vibrantibus pictam* (118, 2). As a matter of fact, this attitude is wrong. The mind cannot conceive anything great *nisi ingenti flumine litterarum inundata* (118, 3). Cf. the preceding discussion for this phrase. *Refugiendum est ab omni verborum ut ita dicam vilitate et sumendae voces a plebe summotae* (118, 4). On the face of it, this doctrine is not Atticistic. The Atticists followed the precept contained in Caesar's well-known warning against unfamiliar words. But the difference is only apparent. Even Atticists like Fronto advise using novelties in words: cf. *ad M. Aur. de Orat.* 3, 2: . . . ut unum et id[em] verbum vetustate noscatur et novitate delectet. To understand the principle set forth by Caesar we must recall Cicero's comment on him in *Brut.* 252: multis litteris et eis quidem reconditis et exquisitis summoque studio et diligentia. The standard of the Atticist was the spoken language, but the spoken language of the cultivated, not of the plebs. It is the vulgar word that has no place in poetry.⁵ *Vilitas verborum* shows that clearly enough. There is then nothing inconsistent in Petronius' position. His doctrine of figures is noticeable. Praeterea curandum est ne sententiae emineant extra corpus orationis expressae sed intexto vestibis colore niteant (118, 5). Cf. Hor. *A.P.* 447-448: vir bonus et prudens . . . ambitiosa recidet ornamenta. Cf. *ib.* 14 ff. Petronius' very just and sensible remark was not always followed even by persons who might have been expected to approve of it. Fronto (*Laudes fumi*

⁵ Cf. Hor. *Epist.* 11, 2, 109 ff.

et pulveris, ad init.) says that one main value of the encomiastic style is the practice it gives in the use of figures for their own sake. *Ecce belli civilis ingens opus quisquis attigerit, nisi plenus litteris sub onere labetur.* Non enim res gestae versibus comprehendendae sunt, quod longe melius historici faciunt, sed per ambages deorumque ministeria et fabulosum sententiarum tormentum praecipitandus est liber spiritus, ut potius furentis animi vaticinatio appareat quam religiosae orationis sub testibus fides (118, 6). This is usually taken to refer to Lucan. I shall reserve my comments temporarily, as it offers little for our present purpose. The phrase *plenus litteris* has already been noted.

I think I have said enough to show that Petronius' sympathies are in general with the Atticists. This appears clearly in his choice of technical terms, and still more clearly in his general attitude. His models are Atticists in the main — Thucydides, Hyperides, Horace, Virgil (cf. Hendrickson, *Class. Phil.* 1, 104 and n. 2; add also the fact that Seneca Rhetor, *Controv.* 3, praef. 6 uses *felicitas* of him, thereby grouping him with Horace). His demand for severe training and much practice implies self-examination and repression. He would have approved Cinna's treatment of his poem (Catul. 95, 1) and Horace's advice to wait nine years before publishing (*A.P.* 388), as well as most of the rest of Horace's creed. His practice seems to correspond to his theory. His restraint has often been noted. His naturalness and directness of method are Atticistic. He gets his effects usually by the simplest methods. Norden (*Antike Kunstprosa*, 1, 258) has pointed out that the literary conservatives of the early empire were the successors of the Atticists of the earlier time. Petronius' sympathies were with the past, were conservative, classic.⁶ His tendencies toward Atticism were tacitly recognized by Bücheler (in a letter quoted by Collignon, 356 n.). He speaks of Petronius' language as "plus latine que celle de Sénèque." "Pétrone," he says, "représente pour moi une tradition plus pure, *tenuiorem* dans le bon

⁶ Cf. the interesting remarks of Whibley, *Studies in Frankness*, 47 and elsewhere.

sens du mot." *Tenuis* is another of the catchwords descriptive of Atticism.

If the conclusion be acceptable that Petronius is virtually an Atticist, one may attempt with more confidence to interpret a passage in the *Saturae*. Collignon (53-54) has already suggested that in 132, 15 we have Petronius' self-defence. His arguments will be strengthened if we look at the poem:

Quid me constricta spectatis fronte Catones
 Damnatisque novae simplicitatis opus?
 Sermonis puri non tristic gratia ridet,
 Quodque facit populus candida lingua refert.
 Nam quis concubitus, Veneris quis gaudia nescit?
 Quis vetat in tepido membra calere toro?
 Ipse pater veri doctos Epicurus amare
 Iussit et hoc vitam dixit habere τέλος.

Whether or not Petronius intended the poem to apply to his own work, it is certainly very appropriate. To the arguments adduced by Collignon (*opus* not applicable to the immediate context; *novae simplicitatis* descriptive of the *Saturae* and *sermonis puri* of the style) may now be added others. *Sermo purus* becomes especially pertinent when we recall that it was another technical term of Atticism, used, e.g., by Caesar of Terence, whose connection with the Scipionic circle would in itself guarantee his Atticism. *Tristic* is used of the grand style by Cic. *Brut.* 20. Thus we have two terms of rhetorical controversy used together in the characterization of the *opus novae simplicitatis*. Nothing could serve better as an excuse for the matter of the *Saturae* than v. 4. The author sees no reason to-reassure his readers of his own virtue, as did Catullus (15, 5-6), Ovid (*Rem. Am.* 385-386), and Martial (1, 5, 8). He assumes as unchallenged the fact that the writer is concerned with life only as material for his art. If I am right in believing that here Petronius expresses his own views, by the use of *sermo purus* and *non tristic* of himself, he has ranged himself explicitly with the Atticists.

One can hardly discuss 118 without touching on the relation of Petronius to Lucan. With regard to the poem that follows, the *Bellum Civile*, I may say that while I do not re-

gard parody or satire as the main motive, I cannot escape the feeling that the general atmosphere of satire which pervades the whole work affects the poem as well. But I wish to consider especially the serious criticism of 118. In the first place, Petronius says, history is not the proper source for subjects for epic. Epic should avail itself (we are to understand that this refers to treatment and not to subject, though Petronius does not make this very clear) of interventions of gods, and should hurry us along through the realms of the imagination.⁷ While Lucan uses his imagination all too well, his only real gods are Fortune and the shadowy but more powerful Fate, and he has constantly to resort to ghosts and goblins. In sharp contrast is Petronius' treatment of the causes of the war. The inconsistency in Petronius' position is that after saying that the historical epic should not exist, he proceeds to compose one. Other parts of the chapter will apply to Lucan too. I cannot help feeling that *vilitas verborum* and *volubilitas* describe both the *Pharsalia* and the *Civil War*. No one can succeed in poetry, says Petronius, save one saturated with reading. Lucan can hardly be so described, despite his great store of faulty and superficial learning. He was an infant prodigy. He had been petted and pampered at first by those about him, and the alluring vices of his style given full opportunity for development. Whether or not the epic tradition established and, for Petronius consecrated, by Homer and Virgil, was outgrown, Lucan did not seem to him to be the man to establish a new one.⁸ If then I have understood Petronius aright, he criticises Lucan's choice of subject, his insufficient preparation, his too prosaic manner, as well as his revolt from the mythological and imaginative treatment of epic.⁹ In his parody, imitation,

⁷ Petronius would have accepted another principle enunciated by Horace, *sic veris falsa remiscet* (*A.P.* 151).

⁸ Norden (*Antike Kunstprosa*, I, 263) shows that the literary innovators of the early empire were descendants of the Asiatics. Hence we have Petronius and Lucan arrayed on opposite sides — another motive for his criticism of Lucan. The divorce between philosophy and Atticism was long since complete.

⁹ Lucan's monotony is criticised by another Atticist, Fronto (*ad M. Aur. de Orat.* 4, I, 11 ff.).

or model, whichever we take the *Bellum Civile* to be, there seems to me to be at least a mild flavor of satire.¹⁰

If we are surprised to find such a mixture of serious criticism and parody or satire, let us think of Aristophanes and his attitude toward Euripides. Euripides and Lucan were both innovators, and in that at least they were akin. Both, trying to introduce new literary standards, met with opposition from their conservative countrymen. Aristophanes does not hesitate to mingle serious criticism with parody in the *Frogs*, as when he has Aeschylus mock the long-drawn-out *εἰείειλίσσουσα* (1348), or end each of Euripides' sentences with *ληκύθιον ἀπώλεσεν* (1208 and elsewhere). Literary criticism in Petronius is no more surprising than in Aristophanes, and we should remember that the literary form in which the comic poet was working was far more restricted by theory and conditions than was that of Petronius.

It is interesting to find in Gil Blas a parallel to the attitude of Petronius toward literature, and the resemblance becomes all the more striking if we accept the statement that the modern picaresque novel is not influenced by Petronius.¹¹ Doubtless a more thorough search would reveal other parallels. In this passage Gil Blas is debating with Nunez the latter's style. Nunez maintains that all compositions that partake of the sublime are the reverse of the simple and natural; that they are enveloped in clouds, and that their darkness constitutes their grandeur. Gil Blas replies: "I like not your prose one atom better than your verse. Your sonnet is a roaring deluge of emptiness" (cf. *vilitas* and *volubilitas*), "and as for your preface, it is disfigured by phraseology stolen from languages yet in embryo, by words not stamped in the mint of general use, by all the perplexity of

¹⁰ Eumolpus — 'the sweet singer' — may stand for the irrepressible and facile type of poet visualized in Horace's Bore. He writes in the very presence of death (115, 3), and in the first two hours of his acquaintance with Encolpius he spoke *saepius poetice quam humane* (90, 3). Perhaps then those critics are right who think the satire of the poem double-edged, cutting both Lucan and Eumolpus. We have seen that Petronius could have had as little sympathy as Horace with rapid verse writing.

¹¹ Chandler, *Romances of Roguery*, part I, 3-4.

a style that does not know what to make of itself. In a word, the composition is altogether a thing of your own. Our classical and standard books are written in a very different manner.”¹² A comparison of the passage in detail will reveal many points of similarity with Petronius. There is the same doctrine regarding the choice of words, the same approval of a simple, natural, unstrained style, and especially the same conservative dislike for novelties in literature, particularly when the novelties seemed to be no improvement over the old. The whole point of view in both Petronius and Le Sage is Atticistic. On the other hand, Nunez differs from Lucan in the frankness with which he sets forth his ideals, but probably mainly in this respect. He represents, of course, a more exaggerated and burlesque type.

I may summarize briefly the results reached. Petronius' literary sympathies were with the past. His models were the classics. Furthermore, the authors he urged his readers to study were among those identified with Atticism. He used words that are part of the technical vocabulary of literary criticism, and gave them meanings they acquired in the controversy between Asianism and Atticism. His principles and his affinities led him to oppose Lucan and the school he represented. Parallels may be found in the relation of Aristophanes to Euripides, and of *Gil Blas* to Nunez.

¹² *Gil Blas*, II, bk. I, chap. 13, Smollett's trans.